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“OOPS, I FORGOT, SORRY”

The spill cries *oops* and *whoops* in the history of American English

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Abstract – Interjections and other elements of spoken language have always been a particularly fruitful area of historical pragmatic research. In this paper, I focus on the interjections *oops* and *whoops* that have been described as spill cries by Goffmann (1978, p. 801). They show a high level of interjectionality (Stange 2016, p. 16), that is to say, they are primarily emotive and exclamatory, they do not require an addressee and are produced semi-automatically. *Oops* and *whoops* do not have a long history. As interjections, they are first attested in the early twentieth century both in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and in the *Corpus of Historical American English*. In Present-day English, they are often associated with apologies. They co-occur with the apology IFID *sorry*, or they can even function as apology IFIDs in their own right. A diachronic corpus analysis, including a collocational analysis, reveals that this association has only developed over time. In the early examples, the element of surprise is foregrounded, while later examples more often display elements of dismay and regret with strong suggestions, or explicit formulations, of an apologetic intent.

Keywords: interjections; spill cries; historical corpus pragmatics; American English; apologies.

1. Introduction¹

Historical pragmatics has always been interested in linguistic elements that are typical of spoken language, in spite of the fact that historical evidence of language use has come down to us in written form only, except for the very recent past. It is in particular elements such as pragmatic markers and interjections that have attracted the attention of historical pragmaticists. Taavitsainen (1995), for instance, provided a pioneering study of interjections in Early Modern English, in which she showed how they are distributed across the different genres of the *Helsinki Corpus*. Brinton (1996) traced a range of pragmatic markers in the history of English, such as Old English *hwæt*, Middle

¹ The title quote is taken from the fiction section of the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) and is dated 1998. See extract (20) below.

English *gan*, and Middle and Early Modern English *anon*. Culpeper and Kytö (2010) carried out an analysis of what they called “pragmatic noise” in Early Modern English dialogues, i.e. items, such as *ah*, *ha*, *oh*, *um* or *hum*, which do not have homonyms in other word classes and which do not have propositional or referential meaning (Culpeper, Kytö 2010, p. 199). And more recently, Jucker (2015a, 2015b) looked at hesitation phenomena, such as *uh* and *um*, which he calls planners, in the history of American English.

The present paper continues this work on elements at the margins of linguistic sentence structures and focuses on the histories of what Goffman (1978, p. 801) has called “spill cries”, i.e. the elements *oops* and *whoops*. These elements have recently received some increased attention as emotive interjections (Stange 2016) but also, and in particular, as elements that may accompany, intensify or indeed perform an apology (e.g. Holmes 1990; Ogiermann 2009; or Lutzky, Kehoe 2017). However, so far very little is known about their historical development. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides first attestations of *oops* and *whoops* as interjections in 1921 and 1937, respectively. The *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) contains some slightly earlier examples, but they confirm that the textual evidence of the history of these elements starts in the early twentieth century.

It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to trace the history of spill cries in American English and to assess the historical evidence. In particular, I want to highlight some of the differences between *oops* and *whoops* and to show how their association with apologies only developed toward the end of the last century. In the early examples, the association is more tenuous and in many cases clearly absent. In the following, I will first give a brief overview of how spill cries have been analysed and categorised (section 2). In section 3, I shall outline the problem of tracing spill cries in large corpora, and I shall also provide some comparative statistical evidence of *oops* and *whoops* in other relevant corpora. In section 4, I will zoom in on the historical evidence of these two spill cries in COHA and show how they developed in twentieth-century American English and how they increasingly became associated with apologies. Section 5 briefly concludes this paper.

2. Previous work on spill cries and their histories

Goffman (1978) analysed *oops* and *whoops* as one particular type of response cry. Response cries, according to Goffman (1978, p. 800), are “exclamatory interjections which are not full-fledged words.” They are regularly emitted in response to events in the world around us and often appear to be addressed to ourselves as much as to any possible nearby listeners. He provides a large range of different types of response cries (Goffman 1978, pp. 801-805), including not only spill cries (*oops!* and *whoops!*) but also the threat startle (such as *EEK!*)

or *yipe!*), revulsion sounds (*eeuw!*), the strain grunt (emitted when lifting or pushing something heavy), the pain cry (such as *oww!* or *ouch!*), the sexual moan (accompanying "sexually climactic experience"; Goffman 1978, p. 804); the audible glee (to express pleasure at an appetising meal just being served); or the triumph call (Goffman mentions Tarzan's cry when besting a lion as an example).

Spill cries, according to Goffman (1978, p. 801) are "emitted to accompany our having, for a moment, lost guiding control of some feature of the world around us, including ourselves." He provides the examples of a woman accidentally choosing the wrong door and backtracking her steps and of a man dropping a piece of meat through the grill. In both cases, the accident, or loss of control, is relatively minor. The cry may also serve as a warning to others, as for instance when we slip on ice; or they may even be uttered as a response to somebody else momentarily losing control. Goffman (1978, pp. 801-802) surmises that they are "as much (perhaps even more) the practice of females as males" and at the same time that "men seem more likely to *oops* for another when that other is a child or a female." He does not provide any empirical evidence for these claims, but they indicate that spill cries may be felt to be gender-specific. The sources investigated in this paper do not allow an investigation of this issue because they do not include demographic speaker information.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines the interjection *oops* as "expressing apology, dismay, or surprise, esp. after an obvious but usually minor mistake" (OED, Third edition, *oops int.* and *n.*) and lists its first occurrence in 1921.

- (1) 1921 Washington Post 1 Nov. 21/4 Oops, muh dear, it's in the last where the dirty work takes place.

The interjection *whoops* is similarly defined as "an exclamation of dismay or surprise, usually upon stumbling, or realizing an obvious mistake" (OED, Second edition, *whoops int.*). The date of the first quotation is in 1937 in a letter by Ezra Pound. For the etymology, the OED refers to *oops*.

- (2) 1937 E. Pound Let. Jan. (1971) 287 Whoops! And do I envy you. I do.

As derivatives, the OED mentions *whoopsie* and *whoopsie-daisy*.

However, the form *whoop* has a much longer history. As a verb it goes back to Middle English, and according to the OED it means "To utter a cry of 'whoop!' or a loud vocal sound resembling this; to shout, hollo (as in incitement, summons, exultation, defiance, intimidation, support, or mere excitement)" (OED, Second edition, *whoop, v.*). It is first attested at around 1400 with the following example.

- (3) a1400 *Parl. 3 Ages* 233 (Text B) And [the falconer] whopis hem [sc. the hawks] to whirry... He wharris & whotes hem & whopes ful lowde.

Here it is a falconer who gives commands to his hawks by whooping to them. The noun *whoop* also goes back much further than the interjection. The OED's first quotation is dated 1602.

- (4) 1602 W. Watson *Decacordon Ten Quodlibeticall Questions* 3 All with one voyce,..with whoopes, whowes and hoobubs, would thrust them out.

The meaning of the noun is given as “an act of whooping; a cry of ‘whoop!’, or a shout or call resembling this; *spec.* as used in hunting, esp. at the death of the game, or by N. American Indians, etc. as a signal or war-cry” (OED, Second edition, *whoop*, *n.1*). The OED also recognizes a much more recent meaning of the noun *whoop*, i.e. “A bump or (occasionally) dip on an off-road racetrack or rally course” (OED, Second edition, *whoop*, *n.2*), for which it provides the following first attestation.

- (5) 1982 Dirt Bike Rider May–June 30/2 Over some of the notorious Hawkstone whoops it went straight as an arrow.

Thus, it is important in corpus searches to distinguish carefully between the interjection *whoops* and the plural form of the noun *whoop* and the third person singular form of the verb *to whoop* (see section 3 below).

In a recent monograph, Stange (2016, p. 17) analyses *oops* and *whoops* as examples of emotive interjections. Interjections, according to Stange (with reference to Nübling 2004, p. 18), can be placed on a continuum of interjectionality (see Figure 1). She distinguishes between emotive, cognitive, conative and phatic interjections, which differ in their degree of interjectionality (see also Ameka 1992). The highest degree of interjectionality is characterised by the following criteria (Stange 2016, p. 17):

1. It is primarily emotive
2. It is exclamatory
3. It does not require an addressee
4. It is produced semi-automatically

Emotive interjections, such as *ow!*, *ouch!* or *yuck!* exhibit all four features. They express the speaker's emotions and sensations, they do not necessarily need an addressee, and they are semi-automatic in the sense that they are often spontaneous and unplanned, and triggered by the sudden occurrence of external events. Cognitive interjections express the speaker's state of knowledge, which may just have changed prior to its emission. Examples are *ah!* and *aha!* Conative interjections are directive. They try to get the addressee's attention and often demand some action or response. The request to others to be quiet by uttering *shh!* is a relevant example. And, finally, elements like *u-huh* or *mhm* are classified as phatic markers. They function as feedback in an ongoing conversation and show a low level of interjectionality (see Ameka 1992; Stange 2016, pp. 11-12).

highest degree of interjectionality		lowest degree of interjectionality	
Emotive <i>Ow!</i>	> cognitive <i>Ah!</i>	> conative <i>Shh!</i>	> phatic <i>uh-huh</i>
primarily emotive exclamatory no addressee required semi-automatic			primarily phatic non-exclamatory addressee required intentional

Figure 1
Continuum of interjectionality (Stange 2016, p. 17).

According to this categorisation spill cries clearly belong to the emotive category and show a high degree of interjectionality. They are exclamatory, they do not require an addressee and they may be a spontaneous and semi-automatic reaction to some minor accident or mishap.

As reactions to accidents or mishaps, spill cries have some similarities to apologies, which in their prototypical form can be seen as utterances with which speakers take responsibility for an offence, and, in fact, several scholars have noted that *oops* is often associated with apologies. Holmes (1990, p. 160), for instance, lists *oops* as one of a possibly infinite number of ways of performing an apology, and Ogiermann (2009, pp. 124-125) lists *ups* (sic) and *whoops* as elements that occur in her data to intensify an apology. Lutzky and Kehoe (2017) focus specifically on *oops* as an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) of apologies. Initially, they discovered that *oops* was one of the unique collocates of the apology IFID *sorry*, that is to say, that it regularly co-occurs with *sorry* in their data, but it does not appear in the list of top collocates of any of the other apology IFIDs that they checked. As data for their investigation, Lutzky and Kehoe (2107) used a 181-million-word subcorpus of the Birmingham Blog Corpus (BBC), containing material from the WordPress and Blogger hosting sites (Lutzky, Kehoe 2017, p. 29). In addition to *oops*, they also found a large number of spelling variants, such as *oooops* with more than just two "o"s, and *woops* or *whoops* with a preceding "w" or "wh". They acknowledge that *whoops* also occurs as a noun in their data, but they maintain that this is very rare. A collocational analysis reveals that *oops* and its spelling variants very regularly occur together with words that suggest an apologetic context. The top collocates according to the z-score are *forgot*, *meant*, *sorry*, *mean*, *I*, *typo*, *wrong*, *say*, *missed* and *supposed*. These expressions indicate what the blogger apologises for (*forgot*, *meant*, *typo*, *wrong*) or they re-enforce the apology (*sorry*). A particularly frequent combination seems to have been *Oops, I forgot....* Lutzky and Kehoe (2017, p. 34) suggest that such phrases may have formulaic and medium-specific functions. Bloggers or commenters use them to introduce information that they accidentally failed to provide earlier.

While spill cries appear to be connected with minor mishaps, apologies have a much broader range of applications. In Deutschmann's (2003, p. 46) well-known definition, apologies comprise four basic components, i.e. an offender who takes responsibility for the offence, the offended who perceives himself or herself or is perceived by the offender as offended, an offence, which may be real or imagined and a recognition of the offence by the offender together with an acceptance of responsibility. In a similar way, Lutzky and Kehoe state that

an apology implies that some wrongdoing or offence has occurred which, in accordance with social and cultural norms, requires remedial action. By uttering an apology, the speaker acknowledges this breach of norms and, according to the definitional criteria of an apology, must take responsibility for the offence and express regret. (Lutzky, Kehoe 2017, p. 28)

Against this background, the question suggests itself whether the association of spill cries with apologies has existed throughout the history of their attestations in COHA or whether it is a more recent phenomenon. In a recent paper devoted to the diachronic development of apologies, Jucker (2018) has shown that the overall frequency of apologies increases steadily and substantially over the two hundred years covered by COHA. The basis for this claim was both the increase of the frequency of apology IFIDs and a similar increase of passages in which fictitious characters explicitly talk about apologies, i.e. passages retrieved with a metapragmatic expression analysis. Jucker (2019) suggests that the increase in the frequency of apologies goes along with a gradual decrease of their weight. What used to be sincere appeals to an interlocutor for forgiveness turns into an expression of regret and finally into a token acknowledgement of some minor infraction or mishap. Such token apologies might be particularly good candidates to combine with spill cries to express a momentary irritation about a minor mishap perpetrated by the speaker. Whether or not this is perceived as an apology, as I will show below, depends on the extent to which the addressee was inconvenienced by this mishap and the degree to which the speaker intends to display any regret for what has happened.

But before I turn to the diachronic investigation of spill cries in COHA, I want to explore their manifestations in a range of different corpora. It is plausible to assume that spill cries are particularly frequent in spontaneous spoken interactions. It is less clear where exactly they might show up in the written registers of COHA. Moreover, it is necessary to test and evaluate the reliability of the corpus retrieval.

3. Corpus methods and preliminary corpus evidence

COHA, the main corpus used for this study, is part of a range of corpora that are available through the website run by Mark Davies (<https://www.english-corpora.org>). They are all fully tagged for word categories and should, therefore, allow specific searches for interjections. However, a closer analysis reveals that for the COHA, the tagging in this specific case is not very reliable. There are a total of 399 hits of the string *whoops* in COHA. 82 of them are tagged as interjections and can be retrieved by the search string *whoops_uh**. The remaining 317 instances are tagged as nouns and can be retrieved by *whoops_nn**. None of the 399 instances of *whoops* are tagged as verbs. A careful check of all 82 instances that are tagged as interjections reveals that 14 of them are actually verbs and six are nouns, which means that almost a quarter of the cases that are tagged as interjections have been given an incorrect tag. Extracts (6) to (9) are relevant examples. They were all retrieved with the search string *whoops_uh** and must therefore have been tagged as interjections.²

- (6) Presently the air was filled with yells and whoops (COHA, 1873, FIC)
- (7) Whoops and laughter echoed off the bedazzled towers, until the noise startled Topsy. (COHA, 2002, Fic)
- (8) If he whoops you, he'll crow over you as long as he lives (COHA, 1908, FIC)
- (9) sells confetti until the pedestrian swims in it – and then whoops it up for a week. (COHA, 1916, NF)

In extracts (6) and (7), *whoops* is a plural noun; and in extracts (8) and (9), it is a verb with a third-person-singular *-s*. As can be seen from these examples, the incorrect tags are spread over the entire period of the COHA, but most of them occur in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In fact, the first clear example of an interjection can be found in 1922.

- (10) Whoops, my dears! Fifty dollars a month and almost nothing to do! (COHA, 1922, FIC)

All 15 examples that are attested before 1922 are nouns or verbs. A cross-check of a random sample of 100 instances of *whoops* that are tagged as nouns reveals a better rate with only nine cases that have been misidentified by the tagger. Seven of them should have been tagged as verbs and two as interjections. Extracts (11) and (12) are relevant examples.

- (11) Somebody whoops and throws an empty beer cup onto the field (COHA, 1999, FIC)
- (12) Mulford, author of *Keys to Successful Stepmothering*, refers to this as the "Whoops! I forgot to have kids. Let me get a ready-made family" syndrome (COHA, 1999, MAG)

The form *whoops* in example (11) is clearly a verb, while in (12) it is an interjection. A similar check of corpora of contemporary English on the

² Tags cannot be made visible in the corpora on the English-Corpora website.

website created by Mark Davies (<https://www.english-corpora.org>) yields better results. Random samples of one hundred instances of *whoops* tagged as an interjection revealed one error in the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and no error at all in the *Corpus of American Soap Operas* (SOAP) or in the *Corpus of Canadian English* (Strathy). The *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) had a slightly higher error rate, with six out of a random sample of 100 hits. The situation for the spill cry *oops* is better. On the basis of similar sample checks, it appears that in all these corpora, it is always correctly tagged as an interjection.

As a consequence of these spot checks, the figures for *whoops* have been manually corrected for COHA. For the comparison corpora, the figures reported here are uncorrected because the deviations are relatively minor, but it must be stressed that they are no more than relatively accurate approximations.³

The interactive nature of spill cries strongly suggests that they must be particularly frequent in text types that record spontaneous interaction, such as everyday spoken conversations. For historical periods we have only indirect evidence of everyday spoken interaction. The COHA, which comprises 400 million words from the 1810s to the 2000s, draws its texts from four different genres: fiction, magazines, newspapers and non-fiction books. Mark Davies, the compiler of COHA, stresses the fact that it is a balanced corpus across the decades, that is to say, each decade contains roughly equal amounts of data from each of the four genres. Diachronic developments across the decades can, therefore, more confidently be claimed to be indicative of diachronic change rather than a result of different frequencies in different genres (see in particular Davies 2012). Thus, the material in fiction accounts for roughly fifty per cent of the corpus for all the twenty decades. And, in fact, it is in the fiction material that the spill cries occur most frequently. I have, therefore, decided to focus on the fiction material of COHA in this investigation in order to have a more coherent database with a reasonable likelihood for spill cries to occur.

In order to be able to make sense of the frequency figures attested in COHA, I have compared the frequency figures of spill cries in the last two decades of COHA with several corpora containing material of Present-day English. Such a comparison sets the figures in perspective, and it gives an indication whether the attested levels are large or small in a more comprehensive context. These alternative corpora are COCA, SOAP, BNC, and Strathy. COCA contains 570 million words of American English from 1990 to 2017 in five different genres; spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic. SOAP contains transcripts of American soap operas from the early 2000s and amounts to 100 million words. According to the English-

³ It is for this reason that in the following I prefer to report rounded and approximate figures rather than precise ones, which would likely insinuate an unrealistic level of precision.

Corpora website, it is particularly useful as a resource for very informal language, but, obviously, transcripts of soap operas consist largely of constructed dialogues, not naturally occurring ones. The BNC material was originally compiled in the 1980s and 1990s, and it contains 100 million words of British English in the genres spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, non-academic, academic and miscellaneous. Strathy, finally, is a product of the Strathy Language Unit at Queen's University and contains 50 million words of Canadian English in the genres spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, non-fiction, academic and miscellaneous (all information on these corpora from <https://www.english-corpora.org>)⁴.

In order to contextualise the figures for COHA Fiction, I searched for the spill cries *oops* and *whoops* in the alternative corpora in the sections spoken and fiction. In the case of COHA, I restricted the search to the 1990s and the 2000s in order to provide roughly the same time frame as for the other corpora. Figure 2 plots the result of this investigation. Spelling variants, such as *oooops*, *whooops* or *woops*, were also included.

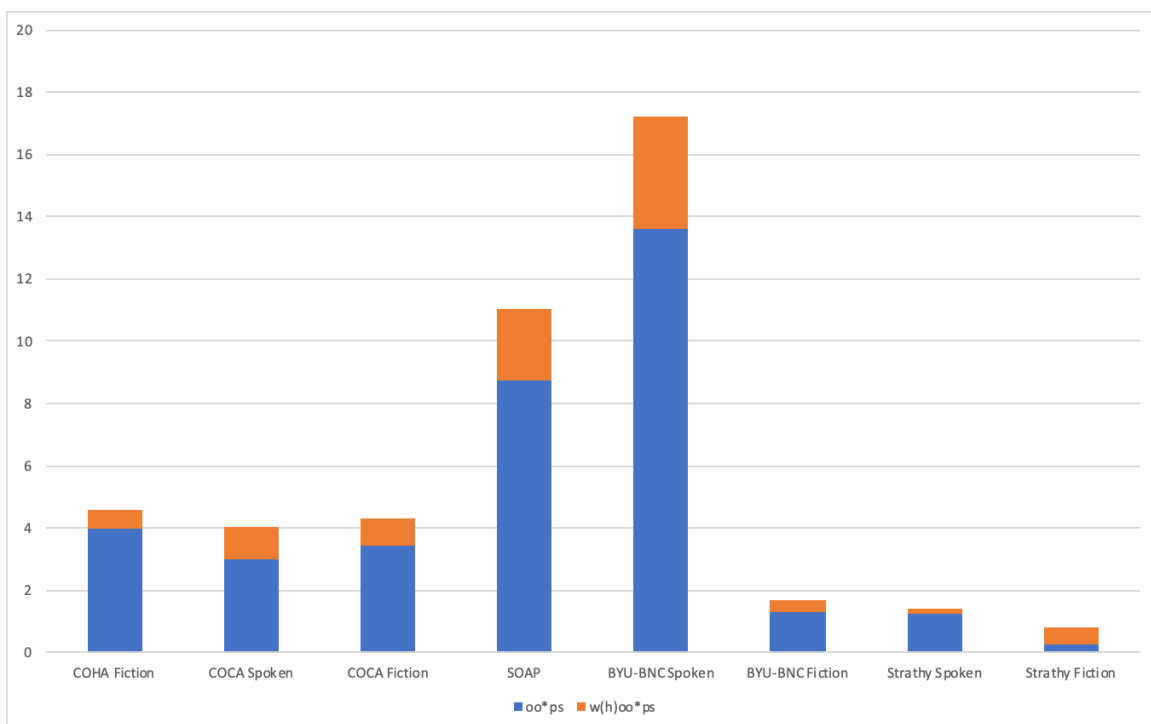


Figure 2
Frequency of *oops* and *whoops* (including spelling variants)
as interjections in several big corpora (per million words).

⁴ The English-Corpora website does not specify the time range of the material in Strathy. According to the Strathy website (<http://www.queensu.ca/strathy/corpus>), the corpus contains material from 1970 to 2010, but a search for some common words (e.g. *table*, *chair* or *sun*) also retrieves hits from a text that is dated 1924.

Figure 2 provides some unexpected results. It shows that in COCA the frequency of spill cries is roughly the same both in the spoken material and in the fiction material. There are about four instances per million words. And this figure coincides with the last two decades of the COHA fiction material. In Strathy, spill cries are rare both in the spoken material and in the fiction material. But in the BNC the picture is very different. Here the combined frequency of *oops* and *whoops* reaches more than seventeen instances per million words in the spoken material in contrast to less than two instances in the fiction material. The American soap operas shows the second highest frequency with about eleven spill cries per million words.

Differences between COCA, BNC and Strathy might, of course, reflect differences between American, British and Canadian English. COHA conveniently fits into this picture. The frequency of spill cries in the two most recent decades is roughly the same as in COCA, and the higher frequency in SOAP, which also contains American English, makes intuitive sense because of the nature of soap operas. Situation comedy depends on numerous twists and turns in the interaction with surprises and minor accidents and mishaps that are likely to provoke spill cries. In Canadian English, spill cries appear to be less frequent, and there is again not much difference between the spoken and the fiction material. However, the situation in the BNC asks for an explanation. It appears that the differences are not, in fact, linked to the different national varieties, but more simply to the composition of the spoken part of these corpora.

The spoken part of COCA contains transcripts of unscripted conversations of a wide range of radio and TV programs (according to the information given on the English-Corpora website). The spoken part of the BNC, on the other hand, consists of about 10 million words, half of which used a demographic approach, that is to say, individual speakers of British English were sampled according to standard demographic parameters and then asked to record their everyday interactions with a portable tape recorder. The other half used a context-governed approach and contains interactions in the contextually based categories educational, business, public/institution and leisure (see Crowdy 1993, 1995). It is highly plausible to assume that conversations in the more formal contexts of discussions on radio or television contain fewer spill cries than spoken interactions in everyday situations, such as, perhaps, animated dinner table conversations or lively chats in a pub.

If this interpretation is correct, a further explanation suggests itself as to why there is no appreciable difference between the fiction material and the spoken material in COCA, which otherwise might seem counterintuitive. Fictional texts often represent casual interactions, in which spill cries are likely to occur. This leads to a sizable frequency in spite of the written nature of the material and in spite of the fact that fiction also contains non-conversational material. The spoken section of COCA, on the other hand, consists of formal

conversations in which spill cries are far less likely than in less formal contexts, and the two effects appear to lead to very similar frequencies in the two contexts.

What this preliminary investigation also shows is that the two most recent decades of fiction material in COHA appear to be comparable to the fiction material in COCA. It is clear that they differ from the more natural and spontaneous spoken language in the BNC. The similarity of the frequencies to the spoken material of COCA, however, may be entirely coincidental. In the next section, I am now ready to explore how the spill cries developed in COHA in order to find out when they make their first appearance in COHA, how they have developed since then, and at what point they started to associate with apologies.

4. The diachrony of spill cries In COHA

As mentioned above, spill cries are not particularly frequent in the fiction material of COHA but significantly more frequent than in the other genres contained in this corpus. In the last two decades, the 1990s and 2000s, they reach about four instances per million words (see Figure 2 above). Except for Strathy fiction, *oops* is substantially more frequent than *whoops* in all the corpora investigated above, accounting for between 75 and almost 90 per cent of the combined frequencies. A look at the earlier decades reveals a slightly different picture. Originally, *whoops* was somewhat more frequent than *oops*, but the frequency of *whoops* does not change very much over the decades, while *oops* increases more or less continually starting from their earliest attestation in the corpus. Figure 3 plots the diachronic development of *oops* and *whoops* in COHA Fiction. The figures for *whoops* are manually adjusted to exclude false hits (see section 3 above). Figure 3 starts with the 1900s because spill cries are not attested in the nineteenth century. The details of these developments should not be overestimated as the figures are relatively small. They rely on no more than a handful of hits per decade except for *oops*, which is attested more regularly from the 1960s onwards and reaches a total of 63 hits in the 2000s.

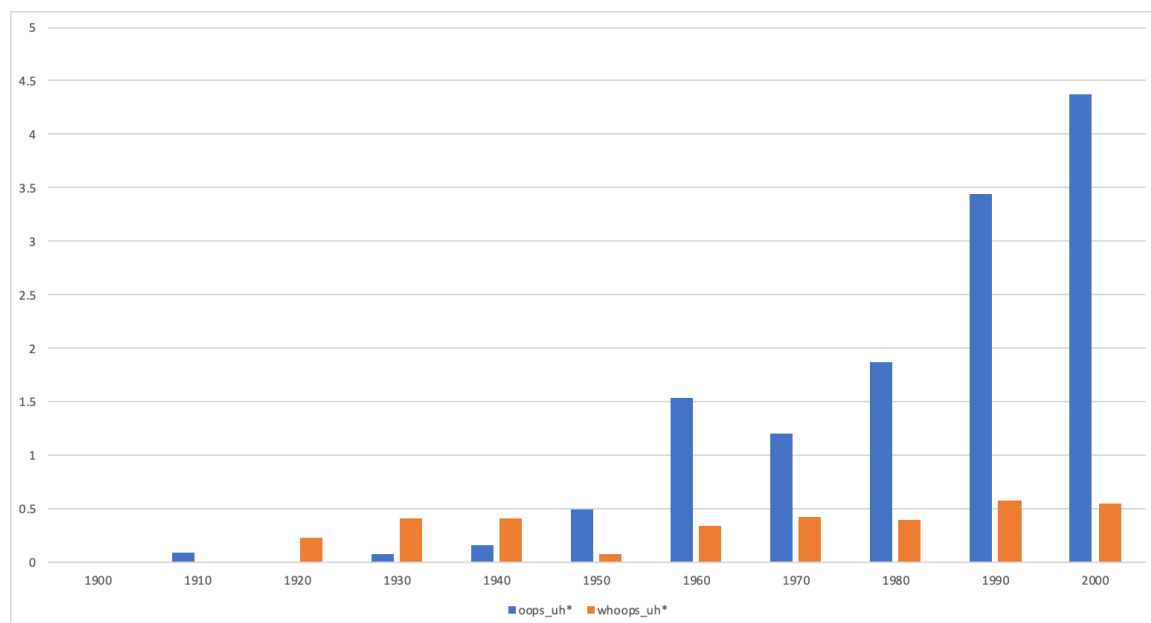


Figure 3
Frequency of *oops* and *whoops* (as interjections) per decade in COHA Fiction.

As mentioned above, the OED's first attestation of *oops* dates from 1921, and the first attestation of *whoops* as an interjection from 1937 (see examples in section 2 above). In both cases, COHA has examples that are somewhat earlier. They predate the first OED examples by four and fifteen years, respectively.

- (13) "I could listen to you all day." "Oops, Horace; he loves me!" mocked the lady's voice. (COHA, 1917, FIC)
- (14) Whoops, my dears! Fifty dollars a month and almost nothing to do! (COHA, 1922, FIC)

After having established the development of *oops* and *whoops* over the course of the twentieth century in COHA, I now turn to the question of its association with apologies. As pointed out in section 2 above, the OED defines the interjection *oops* as "expressing apology, dismay, or surprise, esp. after an obvious but usually minor mistake" (OED Third edition, *oops int.* and *n.*). It is interesting to see to what extent these instances are connected to apologies, and whether the connection has always been equally strong. In order to investigate this question, a collocation search has been carried out to reveal those words that regularly associate with *oops*. A collocation search with the span of four words to either side of the node yields eight lexical collocates that collocate three and more times with the node *oops* (see Table 1).

Collocate	Frequency of collocate in COHA	Frequency of collocation	MI score
<i>sorry</i>	39,425	22	6.86
<i>button</i>	6,528	3	6.58
<i>forgot</i>	14,379	6	6.44
<i>mistake</i>	19,615	3	5.00
<i>guess</i>	40,510	5	4.69
<i>goes</i>	64,984	6	4.27
<i>wrong</i>	57,965	5	4.17
<i>saying</i>	62,667	3	3.32

Table 1
Collocations of *oops* in COHA (span 4; lexical
collocates only; sorted according collocational strength).⁵

Of these *sorry*, *forgot*, *mistake* and *wrong* are strongly suggestive of an apology because they denote entities that typically occur in apologies. The collocates *button*, *guess*, *goes* and *saying*, on the other hand, are more neutral in this respect. Due to the relatively small number of *oops* in the corpus all these collocations are rare, except perhaps for *sorry*. The examples involving *goes* are spread out over the decades from the 1930s to the 1980s. All other examples show a clear preference for the 1990s and 2000s. The following are relevant examples. The node *oops* and the collocates from Table 1 are highlighted in bold.

- (15) **Oops** – there **goes** another one. (COHA, 1934, FIC)
- (16) **Oops** – **sorry**. Didn’t mean to splash you. (COHA, 1953, FIC)
- (17) She thanked Nailles and Nellie, got into her Chesterfield, went out the door and then returned **saying**: “**Oops**, I nearly **forgot** my bumbershoot.” (COHA 1969, FIC)
- (18) “**Oops**, there she **goes** again.” She took his hand and replaced it on her stomach. (COHA, 1971, FIC)
- (19) She laughs and pushes another **button**. “**Oops**, **wrong** tape. I’m trying to improve my Japanese (COHA, 1993, FIC)
- (20) My period came back, innocent, **saying**, “**Oops**, I **forgot**, **sorry**,” (COHA, 1998, FIC)
- (21) Wait a minute, I think I hear someone laughing. **Oops**, my **mistake**, that was someone gagging in the next booth. (COHA, 2003, FIC)
- (22) “**Oops**. **Guess** I was a lil off, huh?”. (COHA, 2006, FIC)

These examples are typical of all the 53 hits extracted from COHA of collocations of one of the eight collocates mentioned above with the node *oops*. In the early years, the examples indicate mostly surprise. In (15) the speaker has lost some hairpins and while bending down to pick them up loses another

⁵ The frequency of the collocate indicates how often a particular word, e.g. *sorry* occurs in the corpus. The frequency of the collocation indicates how often this particular word occurs in the vicinity of the node, here *oops* (within the given span of words; here four to either side of the node). The MI score is an indication of the likelihood of this combination. The higher the score, the less likely it is that the co-occurrence of the node and the collocate are just random.

one, and in (18) the speaker feels her unborn child move in her belly. Example (17) is less clear because COHA does not provide enough context, but from the context that is given, it is unlikely that it is an apology. The only clear apology in the early decades is extract (16), in which the speaker apologizes for having splashed the addressee. This is, in fact, the earliest example in this sample of a clear apology. The later examples, and in particular those from the 1990s and 2000s almost invariably accompany an apology.

The situation for *whoops* is more difficult to assess. COHA does not allow a collocation search of *whoops* as an interjection that excludes hits with erroneous tags. An uncorrected search for the collocates of *whoops_uh** does not yield any lexical collocates with more than five collocations (with a span of four). The only clear collocate is an exclamation mark. The expression *yells* shows four collocations with *whoops*, and *whoops* itself shows three. All other lexical collocates only collocate once or twice with *whoops*. The following are some relevant examples from across some of the decades of COHA in which *whoops* is attested.

- (23) There is a cook and a cleaner-by-the-day, and the new maid-companion, so she should be reasonably well looked after. **Whoops**, my dears! Fifty dollars a month and almost nothing to do! This is the Promised Land! Joyfully, JANE. (COHA, 1922, FIC)
- (24) That is how these things happen. I believe in love... **Whoops**, said Gurlie. I'll bet you do. Wait till you try it. (COHA, 1937, FIC)
- (25) "**Whoops**, I'm late," said the girl, craning to look at her watch. (COHA, 1962, FIC)
- (26) "What's a cop supposed to seem like?" "**Whoops**. Did I say the wrong thing? Is cop' an offensive word? (COHA, 1983, FIC)
- (27) Then he made a sudden show of looking at his watch. "**Whoops**! Class dismissed!" he cried, grabbing up his bookbag. (COHA, 1991, FIC)
- (28) I realized after a moment that she had just then recognized my insignia. "**Whoops**," she said, "sorry, I didn't realize," (COHA, 2004, FIC)
- (29) "Have you taken your medication today?" "**Whoops**," she said, grinning. (COHA, 2006, FIC)

Even the expanded context provided by COHA for each individual hit is not always enough to ascertain the precise function of *whoops* in all these cases. However, these examples only partially fit the OED definition mentioned above that the interjection *whoops* is "an exclamation of dismay or surprise, usually upon stumbling, or realizing an obvious mistake". They seem to have in common a clear element of surprise, but the element of dismay is often absent, and the surprise does not always involve a mistake or there does not seem to be any case of stumbling in these examples. Example (23) from 1922 appears to be an extract from a letter in which the writer expresses surprise at the luxurious living conditions she encountered. *Whoops* appears to be a rhetorical device in the course of her narrative introducing the joyful conclusion of her description at the end of her letter. In example (24) from 1937, *whoops* is used as a response to another speaker's declaration that they

believe in love. The character named Gurlie expresses both surprise and scepticism at that declaration. Neither of these two examples gives the impression of speaker dismay. The speakers do not respond to a "mistake" in the sense of the OED definition, and they do not appear to be apologizing for any wrongdoing. This is different in the examples (25) and (26) from 1962 and 1983, respectively. Here the speakers become aware of the implications of their own actions, either of being late or of having said something slightly inappropriate. There is no explicit indication that the spill cry *whoops* is meant as an apology in these cases, but they appear to have some apologetic overtones. In the more recent examples, there are similar hints of an apology. In the case of (28), the apology follows in explicit form. In the cases of (27) and (29), it is possible to infer an apology from the context (for having kept the class too long and for not having taken the medicine), but in both cases, the apology – if it is really meant as an apology – seems to be either somewhat insincere or ironic. In (27) the speaker is described as making a sudden show of looking at his watch, which might indicate that expression of surprise was somewhat exaggerated. And in (29), the speaker's *whoops* seems to indicate that the question about her medicine suddenly reminded her of the need to take it. *Whoops* may indeed be argued to indicate surprise and dismay, but her grinning suggests that she was neither surprised nor sorry for not having taken her medicine.

The following examples from the most recent decade of COHA reinforce this interpretation.

- (30) When he ran his hands down my hips and cupped my backside he said, "You're not wearing panties." I said, "Oops. Got dressed too fast." (COHA, 2001, FIC)
- (31) He smiled at Liz again and reached for the challah, and she saw there was only one piece left. She said, "Oops, sorry, I'll get some more of that." (COHA, 2007, FIC)
- (32) Drew went from mad to amused in two seconds. She laughed and threw Elissa's comb at Kyle. It bounced off him and landed in the dirt. "Oops, sorry," she said as she retrieved it, wiped it off, and handed it back. (COHA, 2007, FIC)
- (33) "Elizabeth is in love with me?" he says. Just on principle, he never believes anything that Karl says. But if it's in a book, maybe it's true. "Oh, whoops," his mother says. "I really didn't want to say that. (COHA, 2007, FIC)

All these examples have in common that the spill cry occurs in an apologetic context. Either there is an explicit apology IFID or some other element that is typical for an apology (in the sense of Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, pp. 290-294; see also Rieger 2017, p. 559). In (30), *oops* is accompanied by an expression of responsibility, i.e. the speaker acknowledges her own responsibility for the cause of her interlocutor's reproach. Example (31) contains both the apology IFID *sorry* and an offer of repair; the speaker promises to get more challah. In (32), there is again the IFID *sorry* together, this time, not with an offer of repair but a non-linguistic repair itself; she retrieves the misguided comb, wipes it and hands it back to Kyle. And in (33), the speaker uses *whoops* and indicates a lack of intent, which is one of the substrategies of taking on responsibility.

In all these cases, the surface diagnostics of an apology are clearly present, but the level of regret and the sincerity seem to vary somewhat. They do not appear to be very high in any of these examples, but in (30) and perhaps (32), they appear to be particularly low. This interpretation is obviously based on a somewhat subjective evaluation of the limited context that is provided by COHA, but the use of the spill cries *oops* and *whoops* clearly adds to the impression that the apologiser regards the mishap as relatively minor, if it is a mishap at all.

5. Conclusion

The diachronic analysis of spill cries presented in this paper cannot claim more than a preliminary status. The *Corpus of Historical American English* – in spite of its impressive dimensions – contains only 175 instances of the interjection *oops* and 44 instances of *whoops* (including spelling variants and excluding false hits). And the apologies with which the spill cries tend to correlate in the more recent decades often have an uncertain status. Even the extended context that is provided for each hit in COHA often proves insufficient for an adequate interpretation of the nuances and subtleties of character attitudes and their sincerity or facetiousness in issuing an apology.

However, on the basis of the collocational analysis provided above and a careful reading of the available contexts of the selected examples, a relatively clear line of development can be discerned for both spill cries and their association with apologies. The early examples are characterised by a speaker expressing their surprise about an unexpected turn of events either in the current situation or in something said by an interlocutor. Elements of dismay or regret, as suggested by the OED definitions for both *oops* and *whoops*, are either not in evidence or they are very much backgrounded. In the later decades of the twentieth century, this situation changes. Spill cries become more frequent and they seem more and more regularly associated with the speech act of apology. In particular *oops* frequently collocates with the apology IFID *sorry*, and it often works as an apology IFID in its own right. *Whoops* is equally attested in apologetic contexts, but several examples have shown that the apology is not entirely serious. In fact, spill cries may be an indication that the weight of the apology is increasingly reduced (cf. Jucker 2019). Spill cries seem to have turned into useful devices to acknowledge the speaker's sudden awareness that a minor mishap has occurred. It stresses the accidental and non-intentional nature of the mishap, which therefore does not require a request for forgiveness or a humbling display of regret, and it minimises the potential of face loss that is inherent in a sincere apology. The mishap is presented as accidental, unintended and perhaps even surprising to the speaker him- or herself.

More research on the interaction between spill cries and apologies along the lines of Lutzky and Kehoe (2017) and Jucker (2019) is clearly called for. It should be particularly interesting to explore the corpus evidence of larger corpora containing spontaneous spoken interaction and – if possible – with a diachronic dimension covering material from the middle of the last century up to today. It would also be interesting to further explore the social dimension of spill cries, e.g. the question whether they are used more frequently by men or by women. For this, large size corpora of demographically coded interactions would be necessary. However, in spite of what looks like an explosion of available mega corpora, demographic information, as it is available, for instance, for a small subpart of the BNC, is still rare. It is to be hoped that this will change in the near future.

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